



MARRA GAD: RACISM IN PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITIES

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host. You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2019.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, in which we're going to have the pleasure of a conversation with Marra Gad. Marra Gad was born in New York and raised in Chicago, and she is an independent film and television producer, and she now calls Los Angeles her home. Ms. Gad is the author of *The Color of Love*, which will be one of the topics that we're gonna have the pleasure of talking about today in this episode. Marra, thank you for joining me on the College Commons podcast.

Marra Gad: Thank you for having me.

JH: I wanna talk to you about the major, at least one of the major themes as I understand it, in your book, and I hope you'll elaborate the racism in the air that we breathe and what it means to live in a world that is silently racist often. Especially...

MG: Not so silently. [chuckle]

JH: Not so silently. Presumably, in polite communities you would think it often is, but then of course it's not. And in our chatting before the formal interview started, you said something terribly moving and I'm gonna ask you, if it's not too much of an intrusion, to elaborate on that, which is this notion of choking on your own silence. Can you tell me what that meant for you? You piqued my curiosity.

MG: So I will sort of scroll it back a little bit so that the listeners have a little context. The subtitle of my book is, "A story of a mixed-race Jewish girl." And that is my story. I'm 50 years old. I was born to a young unwed white Jewish girl in Manhattan who got pregnant, you know, like 19, and went to her rabbi in a panic. And said, "Rabbi, I cannot keep this baby. My parents will kill me. You've got to find a family." And this Rabbi, as Rabbis did back in the '60s, his thing was making sure Jewish babies who needed homes found Jewish homes. My parents meanwhile in Chicago had found out they were infertile. They got the name of the rabbi. The rabbi said, "I have a girl due in April and you can have her baby." They got a call on my dad's birthday to say that I've been born. They flew to New York to pick me up. And my mother tells the story, the lawyer looked into the crib, and all the color drained out of his face because I was the color of milk chocolate.

MG: And he looked at the nurse and he said, "Are you sure that's the right baby?" And the nurse said, "That's the baby." And the rabbi freaked out because my biological mother knew that no one would knowingly take a biracial baby in 1970. And so she didn't tell him that her lover had been black. She left the lawyer, the rabbi, and my parents to work it out. And the rabbi said, "Listen, a mistake was made.

We're so sorry." And my parents said, "No mistake was made. That's our daughter." So in 1970, my parents brought me back to Chicago. So I am a 50-year-old, Halachically Jewish biracial woman who, for years, has been like a unicorn. I was the only brown face in a sea of Ashkenazi Jews for decades. Decades.

JH: Wow.

MG: And so everybody talked about me and talked about my family constantly. Behind our backs, sometimes in front of our backs. And when I said earlier that I had choked on my silence for so long, it's because I didn't feel like I could say anything. Nobody wanted to talk about this. Societally, we were not talking about what it was to be biracial, much less biracial and Jewish. We've only, in the last few years, started acknowledging that there are people that tend to get othered, and so I didn't say anything because who was I gonna talk to? Nobody wanted to talk about it. I was already making people palpably uncomfortable. I didn't wanna make people more palpably uncomfortable, and so I was silent for decades. But I made the decision to write this book because I have something to say. For years, all I wanted was to be warmly embraced and accepted, and so I thought if I don't say anything, people will be more comfortable. But that's not true.

MG: And so 25 years of therapy later, and to be very clear, I have been in therapy for 25 years to figure out how to live with joy and a light heart in a world that has often told me I don't belong anywhere. And so I don't choke on my silence anymore. Now I'm here to speak and to say, "No, this is what's true. This is what it is like to live in my skin."

JH: So I think that the progressive community, certainly in America today, in major cities such as our own Los Angeles, sees itself as prepared to hear you. Do you think they're prepared to hear you or... I might phrase the question in another way, do you feel heard?

MG: For the first time in my life, I feel seen and heard. Now, I would not necessarily say that it is by the progressive community.

JH: Great, elaborate on that.

MG: So, so far I have been on book tours since the end of October, and my final presentation of 2019 will be here at the URJ Biennial. Most of my audiences have been older Ashkenazi Jewish audiences. And by older, I would say, starting at about 65, and certainly going older than that. And by those people, I feel very seen, and very heard, and loved. I feel loved, and it is remarkable in that way. How we define progressivism these days seems to be a moving target. What I will say is that I find that people who tend to define themselves as very liberal and very progressive tend to believe that racism, intolerance, hatred, other people are doing that. Not us; we're above that. And so, I do find it a different conversation with people that don't think that they're a part of that conversation. What I believe to be true is that intolerance and hatred is a universal human condition, right?

JH: Agree.

MG: All over the world and every corner of the world, there are people saying, one group to another, "You are less than, you don't deserve to live, you deserve to die." None of us is above that, or immune to it, or separate from it. My story happens to be this because this is my way of experiencing it. But I'm just one story. I view it as our collective human problem. Therefore, it's our collective human problem to address. It's the people that don't think they're a part of that on either side that it's hard to connect that.

JH: They delay progress.

MG: Yeah.

JH: I just had an interview recently with an officer of the URJ, Audacious Hospitality. Among her tasks is to help people come to terms with the fact that they bear these qualities of racism, exclusionism, and all these other things, -isms that we...

MG: Yes.

JH: One of the challenges is to confront well-meaning people with this quality that no one wants to come to terms with these things 'cause they're not attractive things, and we're not proud of them. And yet, it seems that in this progressive corner, I think that there is a consciousness that we have to grapple with that truth rather than pretending that we're not a party to it.

MG: I hope that's true. I hope that's true. I'm not sure yet.

[music]

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click Sign Up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing. Help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

[music]

JH: So I'm gonna play a game with you, a thought experiment, and you tell me how I do in the game.

MG: Oh, my. Okay.

[overlapping conversation]

JH: We'll make it a game.

JH: So if I were to put myself in your skin and try to experience, to imagine your experience, I would guess that there are, at least, two types of intrusiveness or maybe even aggression, I don't know what the right word is, that are particularly knotty, K-N-O-T-T-Y, because they come from a place of goodness. And struggling with an aggression that thinks it's not aggressive is much more difficult than struggling with an aggression that is simply aggressive.

MG: I would agree with that, yeah.

JH: And so, I would imagine that you confront, A, romanticization from a certain progressive personality that says, "Oh, how wonderful, a black Jew." And they romanticize your experience and they kind of fetishize it.

MG: No one has ever done that to me.

JH: Really?

MG: No.

JH: I'm glad to be corrected. The other one is well-meaning but, nevertheless, intrusive curiosity.

MG: Plenty of that. There's also the not well-meaning.

JH: Right, right, right.

MG: Wildly aggressive, yeah.

JH: So the wildly aggressive part, we should also talk about as a separate category. For the moment, I just wanna talk about the ways in which it's so challenging to tackle painful, disrespectful engagement that comes from a place of decency and goodness. And the only reason I have any thoughts about this or curiosity about it is because any Jew who has ever been around enough Christian missionizing knows that as aggressive as the missionizing is to us, and as resentful as we are of it, if we pause, we recognize that they're doing it because they think they're being good to us.

MG: It's very funny, now that we are talking as a community, that the goodwill kind that you've been talking about has really ramped up. And the first way that it always manifests itself when I meet someone new is that they want me to know they're not racist. And so, these really well-meaning people try to tell me that they're not racist by letting me know that they have a black friend.

JH: Right, right.

MG: By somebody put Luther Vandross on in the car when they picked me up from the airport and said, "Oh, this is your music, right?" And I was like, "Oh, my god." And so... And to your point, it really as ill-executed as it is, I know that it is coming from this place of, "I want you to feel comfortable with me." And because I also know what the opposite of that is, I don't dig in with those people because there is a larger conversation that I think we have to have first in order to address the nuances of that, right?

JH: Yeah.

MG: And so, when somebody really is coming from a good place, I do my best to be graceful in those moments. That is a choice I've made. I acknowledge that for other people that is not a choice, but that's a choice I've made. Then there's this middle place. So as an example, when I came to the McCormick place today to pick up my badge, I went up to the desk and I gave my name. And the person behind the desk said, "Oh, Marra Gad has to come pick up the badge herself." And I looked at this person and I said, "I am Marra Gad." Now, instead of saying, "Oh, I'm so sorry," or "May have your ID please," which should have been the next question, this person said, "Really, ?" And I said, "Really." And then continued to dig, "Are you press?" Still have not been asked for an ID, okay? Because this person clearly could not wrap their brain around the fact that this non-white person had walked up and was not press and was asking for a badge. And that is actually not well-meaning right?

JH: Yes, so you're calling that the middle ground.

MG: That's middle because this is not somebody who was looking at me with aggressiveness in their face and saying, "What are you doing here?"

JH: "How dare you?" Right.

MG: Which has also happened here. This middle ground of what I'm talking about is literally this sort of, "Well, I've never seen one of you before and I don't quite know what to do with myself." And so instead of just saying, "Can I have your ID," and treating me like any other person that would have walked up, we ended up in this vacuous lost awkward space. That actually is harder for me to deal with than the well-meaning people. I have found a great deal of grace with the well-meaning people who are now at least trying to let me know that they want me to feel comfortable. This is the first time that anybody has ever been concerned about my comfort.

JH: Now let's get to the third category which is the downright aggression.

MG: Yeah, the downright aggression. Listen, that is what it is. That is racism. That is racism.

JH: In your experience, I'm just curious what you think is driving that? Do you think it's fear, do you think it's anger, do you think it's... I'm just curious.

MG: I think it's a lot of things. And in an effort to figure out how to be out in the world, I have done my best to let each human come to me and show me who they are, and I make an assessment. "Oh, this is who you are. You are either you are my people or you're not my people." And so for some people it is fear; for some people it's just absolutely anger. Right now in particular we live in a really angry vitriol fueled time where anti-semitism is on the rise, anti LGBTQ, violence is on the rise, anti everything is on the rise, and violence is a real part of that. I also think it's human nature that when we meet one another, there are many people who do the scanning, and they say, "Okay this is a new being. Where are the places where I can see that we line up so that I can create comfort for myself?"

MG: When you are somebody who doesn't naturally fall into boxes that can be ticked, that for some people create that triggers. It triggers fear, it triggers anxiety, it triggers anger. The ones who come from a place of nastiness and of "what are you doing here", it's hard to know what drives another human being to say that to somebody's face like that, and yet it happens to me all the time. It happens to me all the time in Jewish spaces, in particular. And to be clear, the black community is no more comfortable with my otherness. Black people are Christian and Muslim; that's the pervasive belief. It's not true. It could be anything if you're black. But the pervasive belief is that Jews are white, and black people are Christian and Muslim, and I fall in between and nobody knows what to do with themselves. The palpable push always just feels like they think I'm a threat and that's what's so hard to swallow.

JH: So that goes back to fear.

MG: They feel threatened by this brown being that they don't... And you're sitting across from me, what's so threatening? And it's so hard to swallow. It's so painful. I went after the Pittsburgh massacre, I really... It's a 50-50 shot any time I step into a Jewish space that I will have a good or a not so good experience. It all depends on who is on the door. It all depends on who I end up sitting next to. And so, I do not belong to a synagogue because 90% of the time it's not a good experience for me unless I'm going where people already know me, and I don't have anybody in LA. My family is in Chicago. But after the Pittsburgh massacre, I decided that I wanted to be bigger than my discomfort and to show up for Shabbat as we were asked to do. And I went to a synagogue and it was one that everyone I knew, Rabbis, everybody was telling me, "Go to this place. They will be so warm and welcoming, they'll overwhelm you with love." From the moment I arrived, it was the opposite. Their security people practically strip-searched me. And when I said, what? They said, "You have to understand. We don't know you, and there's a lot of anxiety because of the Pittsburgh massacre." And so I had a chat with the security person at this particular Synagogue and I told that person... I told him how that made me feel and he apologized, and then I tried to go walk into the...

JH: Sanctuary?

MG: Yeah, and the usher stood there staring at me with a [Hebrew] in his hand and I looked at him and I said, "Good Shabbos." And he looked at me with this blank look on his face and I said, "Good Shabbos." And he's gripping the [Hebrew], and I grabbed it. And I said a third time, "Good Shabbos." But by then, that tears were coming because it was very clear, he was like frozen at the side of me. And I walked in, and I was looking for somebody to sit with 'cause there was... I was looking for somebody else who was alone thinking maybe, I'd sit with that person. And I sat down and the people that were sitting a couple of rows down got up and moved. And I lost it because it took everything I had, everything I had, to go that day. And from start to finish, it was a catastrophe. And when I voiced my extreme pain and displeasure, the responses were, "You have to understand. On the heels of the Pittsburgh massacre, everybody is on edge, and we feel threatened." And I said, "With all due respect, the Pittsburg shooter was a white man. And on my worst day, I don't resemble a white man. So tell me, what is it about me that is so threatening to you?" And that's the question nobody wants to answer. And they didn't. That is what is so profoundly, profoundly painful. I came to pray with my family, and I was told, even though the Pittsburgh shooter was a white man, that I was a threat... Are you okay?

JH: I'm terribly moved. I think we should all be ashamed. And I'm a little bit daunted.

MG: Why?

JH: I'm daunted because there's a misalignment going on that I know it's gonna be Herculean for us to realign. So I asked you a hypothetical where it was a thought experiment, and I was saying, "I wonder if people romanticize." And you looked at me and like, "What planet are you from?" Because you didn't say that on the podcast 'cause you were so polite, but...

MG: That's kinda true. [chuckle]

JH: Yeah. Alright, so listen, you gotta put yourself out there sometimes. But here's why, here's why I would have thought that. Because here's what people say behind your back and in front of your back. When they see Ethiopian Jews wearing Israeli uniforms, their heart glows with pride. That's what I mean about the romanticizing. I used the word romanticize when they take a reality which is complicated, and rich, and beautiful, and ugly.

MG: Yes.

JH: And it's human.

MG: Yes.

JH: It's exactly what you said. You just gave us a beautiful articulation of the human spirit, which is complicated, and just...

MG: It's filthy and messy, yeah.

JH: Right, exactly. And gorgeous. And the human spirit, it's everything.

MG: Yes.

JH: But you get a bunch of the kind of Jews I hang around with, a bunch of self-understood liberal Jews, or progressives, or whatever, who were all both sincere and prone to these mistakes. And when we talk about Jews of color, we're celebrating it. We're patting ourselves on the back. And I'm saying that self-critically. What I mean is, I'm saying that to point out the failure here, which is that, why are we patting on ourselves on the back, because we are indulging, we are luxuriating in the convenient validation of our progressive myth.

MG: Yes.

JH: And we are projecting it on to people of color because people of color, the difference is a visible difference as opposed to an internal difference, or differences that aren't obvious to the outside.

MG: That's right.

JH: It's really easy to project your angelic best self on to being not KKK.

MG: Yes.

JH: It's like, I love black people, or whatever. I mean something... And here's the thing... And here's where I was coming from. That's why I asked you the question about romanticizing because it does happen. It just clearly hasn't happened in your experience, and it may not happen in the presence of actual Jews of color. But what is happening nevertheless around, at least the tables I've been around, is a kind of celebration of the fact that Judaism is filled with the human rainbow. And that celebration is sincere and honest and also self-deluding and romanticized. And that's why I asked.

MG: Well, and here's... And go with me on this first.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

MG: Because what is happening is that social media, to your point, we see the pictures on Instagram, of Ethiopian soldiers on Israel. And everybody's so happy, and it's so beautiful, and so amazing.

JH: Right. Yeah, yeah.

MG: So there is a world on social media that projects this progressive, liberal, open, warm, loving environment. But one-on-one, often what happens... Because on social media, we can edit ourselves into our progressive, gorgeous, open-minded perfection.

JH: Right.

MG: But when we're in real life, the opposite happens. So on the tail end of that story, since I no longer choke on my silence, I called to the Rabbi from this congregation that I went to in LA that was so awful. And this Rabbi is very, very public about being exactly all of those things. A voice of progressivism and voice of equality. It took multiple tries to get the Rabbi to return my call because I kept getting told how busy and important this Rabbi was doing the work out in the world. And I said "Respectfully, I consider that congregation to be this Rabbi's house. This happened at their house. I want to speak to the head Rabbi. That's what I want and that's what I deserve." And ultimately, what I got was a very awkward voice mail that said, "We talked about your situation at a couple of our staff meetings. I'm so sorry that happened, and I hope you'll feel comfortable coming back another time."

MG: So a lot of also what happens is that the romanticizing happens out on social media, but in life, when real things are happening, real people don't know what to say and don't know what to do. And so oftentimes, they do nothing or sometimes they say the wrong thing. And it's challenging, and it does start with our leadership. If our clergy and our Jewish professionals don't have the language and the comfort to address what's happening in real time, how is anybody else supposed to?

JH: Can I offer what I hope is a ray of hope?

MG: Please, I'll take anything.

JH: Intermarriage. It's changing the, forgive the pun, complexion...

MG: Yes.

JH: Of the American...

[laughter]

MG: Sorry. I thought you were gonna say "face of"

JH: As long as I got a laugh...

MG: I thought you were going to say face, which also would have been a great choice. Well done.

JH: Okay, alright, as long as I get points for the pun, we're okay.

MG: Absolutely.

JH: It really is changing the complexion of the Jewish community. It's slow 'cause apparently it takes time to grow up. By the way, it's not changing just because they grow up. They grow up and they face challenges, and then we have to rehash this a lot. But we're doing the work at a higher rate of frequency now, which hopefully will get the work done more thoroughly. And I know this because it just so happens that my wife and I chose to educate our kids K through 12 Jewish, and we see it.

MG: I see it too.

JH: And I'm just...

MG: No, I see it too.

JH: And I'm just casting the net out there for some hope, and we'll catch some hope. But it's work. Just because the kids are in the classroom, doesn't mean it's kumbaya.

MG: Listen, it's... We have gotten... I'm not the only... I mean, I still am the only brown face, generationally speaking, around. But I see it. We are growing beautifully more and more and more diverse. And I live on hope. I live on hope. I am deeply proud to be Jewish. If I had to choose, I would choose being Jewish. And I was talking to a friend of mine, a rabbi friend of mine, this morning. And I said, "You know, in my family, I'm the one who will say, "Family, I love you. And we have a problem, so let's figure out how to fix it." This is my way of saying to the Jewish family, "Family, I love you."

JH: Yeah.

MG: "And we have a problem, so let's figure out how to fix it together." I will never stand up in front of a group of people and say, "You have a problem." We have a problem.

JH: Well, you do, just for what it's worth, in your presence and your personality, you do convey all the love of a family member who's sharing our destiny.

MG: Thank you.

JH: And so that's powerful and embracing and moving in its challenge, its appropriate challenge, which you are also tasking us with. Us being you and me and all of us.

MG: We have work to do.

JH: We have work to do.

MG: And I believe that we can do it from a non-combative loving place. That's what Torah teaches us. I believe that.

JH: It's pretty compelling to walk the walk. I suspect, and appreciate if it's true, that it's exhausting.

MG: It is, it is. This is the most challenging thing I've ever done. It's probably the bravest thing I've ever done. To write a memoir, it's like walking naked out into a sea of family, friends, and strangers.

[laughter]

MG: And saying, "This is who I am."

JH: Yeah.

MG: And I mean, and I'm pretty naked, but I don't see any other way. And so, it is exhausting, but it's also amazing. It's amazing to feel seen. Do you know what I mean?

JH: You know the honest answer to that question? If you look at me in the context of urban America, you're gonna draw some stereotypical conclusions, but conclusions nonetheless. Just by the way I dress, the way I carry myself, the way I speak, my own coloring, and my own hair color, whatever it is, you're gonna draw certain conclusions about me. You're gonna draw a conclusion that I am a cisgendered, heterosexual man, highly educated and middle class. That means that without any merit, without deserving a scintilla of it, I get the dumb stupid luck of being seen.

MG: Fair enough. You know, it's very funny when people read my book... And I'm coming to understand that for people who know me, it's very painful for them to read my book. And for people who don't know me, it's very painful for them to read my book. And I get all of these really, really emotional notes from people, friends, and strangers. And they say, "God it's so painful." And somebody said to me, "If you would have ended it here... "

[laughter]

MG: "It would have been so much easier for me." And it was like... And it would have been the Hallmark-y, Hollywood-y version of an ending, but it wouldn't have been the authentic ending of the story, and so I responded. But what I wanted to... It's so hard, and this person just keep saying, "It's so

hard for me. It's so hard for me." And what I wanted to say, but I didn't. In this particular case, it wouldn't have been productive. I said, "Okay, but can you imagine how hard it is for me?" And I'm going to start asking that question.

JH: I think it's only fair of all of us, to expect from all of us, multiple capacities and multiple limitations.

MG: Yeah.

JH: All human beings, I think, do have the capacity to get out of our own skin and empathize. That's what we have the word empathy for.

MG: If we choose to.

JH: If we choose to. A, you have to want to. But even when you're game, and you're in it, and you do care, and you do empathize, you still have to recognize that empathizing isn't experiencing. It's different. It's a different ball game. And I think that it's meaningful to empathize with one another, and we can build relationships, but then we have to ask the other questions that follow, which are different questions.

MG: And they're hard questions. The other question I am going to start asking people is, "Would you want to trade places with me for one day?" I'd be willing to bet people would say, "No."

[laughter]

JH: Well, it's easy. Actually, it's too easy. One day... It depends on the day.

[overlapping conversation]

MG: But you know what, it actually... Sometimes it doesn't depend on the day. Because it isn't just... We're here talking about the Jewish community.

JH: Right.

MG: But it's also hard just out in the world, right now. So I would offer that one day might be enough.

JH: Yeah, yeah, it might be enough.

MG: Yeah.

JH: Well, thank you for spending one hour with me. I very much enjoyed getting to know you, even though it was just a little bit.

MG: Thank you.

[music]

JH: You've been listening to the College Commons podcast, produced and edited by Jennifer Howd, and brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ Biennial series special thanks to Mark Pelavin, the URJ Chief Program Officer and Biennial Director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American Adventist. We hope you've enjoyed this episode, and please join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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